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ABSTRACT

Between 1876 and 1883, Melvil Dewey worked as a Boston entrepreneur promoting a variety of educational schemes that addressed the nation's library, metric, and spelling reform interests. During that time he started and lost one business and started another within weeks. In addition, he used his reform zeal to develop credibility with a number of associations that he had helped to organize, then lost that credibility, only to begin to rebuild it all over again. Throughout, he retained his boundless energy, intense commitment, self-righteous arrogance, and irrepressible reform spirit. He made many friends and enemies. Most who came in contact with him, however--whether they were his superior, peer, or subordinate--quickly recognized him as a forceful personality not easily swayed from goals he had set when he arrived in Boston in 1876. (Contains 19 footnotes.) (MES)

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"Dewey In Boston: 1876-1883"

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Abstract:

Between 1876 and 1883, Melvil Dewey worked as a Boston entrepreneur promoting a variety of educational schemes that addressed the nation's library, metric, and spelling reform interests. During that time he started and lost one business, and started another within weeks. In addition, he used his reform zeal to develop credibility with a number of associations he helped organize, then lost that credibility, only to begin to rebuild it all over again. Throughout he retained his boundless energy, intense commitment, self-righteous arrogance, and irrepressible reform spirit. He made many friends, and many enemies. Most who came in contact with him, however--whether superior, peer, or subordinate--quickly recognized him as a forceful personality not easily swayed from goals he had set when he arrived in Boston on April 10, 1876.

On April 10, 1876, Melvil Dewey, a young entrepreneur with a passion for popular education, stepped off the train in Boston to begin what he called his "life's work." For two years previous he had been Associate Librarian of Amherst College, where he created his Decimal Classification. In Boston, however, he had his sights set on bigger things.[1]

[1] Much of the information contained in this paper is taken from my Irrepressible Reformer: A

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By May 5 he had negotiated an agreement with Ginn and Company, an educational publishing firm with a manufacturing department that also produced educational materials. In return for $2,000, Dewey agreed to set up an all-purpose office with interests in spelling reform, adoption of the metric system of weights and measures, and free public libraries. Dewey promised Ginn 10 percent of the profits specific to sales of the bureau metric materials, and agreed to cover advertising, manufacturing costs, and office rental at 13 Tremont Place.[ii]

Not much money for such big plans, but Dewey was undeterred. Since he had little money or collateral himself, he set up a system of business connections whose financial interests he interlinked through a series of "bureaus" he was creating. For example, he arranged for Ginn to publish J.P. Putnam's "Metric School Chart" and negotiated agreements with the G. M. Eddy Tape and the Fairbanks Scales companies to supply him with metric measuring devices. All the companies believed they were working with Ginn; none were aware they were actually making arrangements with a separate "bureau" using Ginn's sales network to market its products.[iii]

At the same time, however, Dewey worked on library interests. In April he discussed his plans for a library journal with Boston Athenaeum Director Charles Cutter, and in their conversation found out Cutter had written U.S. Commissioner of Education John Eaton about Dewey's new decimal classification. Cutter knew Eaton was planning a major report on U.S. public libraries as part of the nation's 1876 centennial celebration, and because Dewey's scheme was "one of the most important contributions to library economy that has been made for many years," Cutter told Eaton, the report "would be very incomplete without some account of it." Several days later the Bureau asked Dewey for "a list of my library sistem." Before replying, however, Dewey pushed Cutter on the subject of a library journal. Together they agreed to "try for a place for the journal in the library volume." Dewey then wrote Eaton directly, asking for "simpathy in the library project."[iv]

On May 16 Dewey left for New York on the overnight boat from Boston for an American Metrological Society (AMS) meeting. He arrived at 7:00 a.m., and since he was not obligated until that afternoon decided to visit Publishers Weekly (PW). There he found editor Frederick Leypoldt and Associate Editor Richard R. Bowker. His intentions were clear. He wanted to alert PW to his plans for a journal, and for a bureau that would market library supplies. Leypoldt

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Biography of Melvil Dewey (Chicago: American Library Association, 1996).

[ii] Dewey Diary, April 20, 1876; May 2, 1876, Melvil Dewey Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts Reading Room, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York, New York (hereafter cited as Dewey Mss.)

[iii] Dewey Diary, April 25, 1876; April 27, 1876, Dewey Mss. A copy of the contract between Ginn and Putnam can be found in Box 68, Dewey Mss.

[iv] Dewey Diary, April 18, 1876; April 19, 1876; April 20, 1876; April 21, 1876; April 22, 1876; April 27, 1876 (quoting April 20, 1876, letter from Cutter to Bureau of Education); April 28, 1876; and April 29, 1876, Dewey Mss. Dewey used various forms of simplified spelling his entire adult life. I quote them here without use of "[sic]."

said he was especially interested in the former, but also told him about a forthcoming PW editorial suggesting librarians meet in Philadelphia during the nation's centennial. Dewey loved the idea, and together the three men quickly drafted a "preliminary call" for a conference of librarians on August 15. Leypoldt forwarded copies to several Boston librarians.[v]

At 4:00 p.m. Dewey went to Columbia College to attend the AMS meeting, and was promptly elected to its Council. While there, he described his arrangements with Ginn to market metric devices through an American Metric Bureau (AMB). When Dewey returned to PW offices the next morning, Leypoldt said he was not interested in a "bureau" of library supplies, but wanted to own and distribute a library journal from New York. He then asked Dewey to become its Managing Editor, and run it from Boston. Except for rent, Leypoldt said, he would cover all Dewey's office expenses incurred for the journal and pay Dewey $500 a year for his work, plus 20 percent of the journal's gross receipts. Dewey quickly accepted.[vi]

An active May and June were only prelude to an even more hectic July and August, when Dewey's specific plans for his education reform interests took shape. By that time he had determined to establish "bureaus" for the manufacture and sale of library, metric and spelling reform supplies (he helped organize the Spelling Reform Association [SRA] in August), and to manage all these interests from his Boston office. To fund them he linked the accounts for each into a single set of books, thus allowing him to extend his limited financial base by shifting funds from one account to another as he deemed necessary. Most business contemporaries would have judged Dewey's methods irresponsible, but to an irrepressible reformer shunning personal gain and intensely committed to education of the masses, their use seemed warranted. For Dewey, the ends justified the means. And to gain those ends Dewey worked long hours, lived very frugally, and rolled back into his ventures almost all the money he earned.

The prospectus for a library journal that Dewey drafted for the Bureau of Education is illuminating for what Dewey hoped to accomplish as its Managing Editor. "The science of library management, and particularly that part of it which relates to the elevation of the tastes of readers, is yet but in its infancy," he said. The journal would accelerate the growth of that science in special ways. First, the journal would become a "medium of communication" so librarians could learn from each other's experiences. Second, emphasis would be not so much on identifying quality books as on methods for getting those books read. Third, the journal would also facilitate "early completion" of a new edition of Poole's Index to Periodical Literature (compiled by W. F. Poole as a Yale student in the 1840s) and effect "a national organization" dedicated to "bringing the libraries into intimate relations." Finally, Dewey forecast a library "bureau" that would "serve as a guide in selecting the best forms of the various library supplies." The "bureau" would also explore printing titles of new books "in such a way that they can be usd for the catalogues of all libraries." Although these could be distributed to subscribing libraries at "slight expense," they would inevitably lead to "an immense saving of time" because each title would be cataloged only once. In effect, Dewey had turned a prospectus

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[v] Dewey Diary, May 11, 1876; May 12, 1876; May 13, 1876; and May 16, 1876, Dewey Mss.

[vi] Dewey Diary, May 17, 1876; May 18, 1876, Dewey Mss. A copy of the contract Leypoldt proposed to Dewey, dated May 18, 1876, can be found in Box 64, Dewey Mss.

for a library journal into an outline for a library association and a library bureau, all three of which he believed would facilitate the development of uniform systems and increase efficiency.[vii]

At 10:15 a.m. on October 4, Boston Public Library Director Justin Winsor called the librarians' conference to order at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Before the end of the conference a committee on permanent organization reported a preamble to a still unwritten constitution. "For the purpose of promoting the library interests of the country, and of increasing reciprocity of intelligence and goodwill among librarians and all interested in library economy and bibliographic studies," the preamble stated, "the undersigned form themselves into a body to be known as the AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION." Dewey signed first.

At 25 Dewey was different from other ALA leaders. While he certainly shared their belief in the power of reading and the educational mission of the library, he was convinced the best way to maximize the library's potential was to create relatively uniform collections of quality materials and increase service efficiency by standardizing internal library procedures with common forms, appliances, and rules and systems of arrangement. Throughout the conference Dewey was the only prominent participant to focus on small public libraries which, he realized, stood to gain most from standardization and systematization. Small public libraries, he believed, had the greatest potential to meet the educational needs of "children of the lower classes" beyond the elementary school.

By October, Dewey had moved his offices to more spacious quarters at 1 Tremont Place, where he continued to make every effort to tie together all his reform interests. There he not only served as AMB Manager, but also as SRA Secretary and editor of its publications and as ALA Secretary-Treasurer and LJ Managing Editor. To AMB members he later wrote: "Every practical labor or money-saving device has been employed to make the most of our limited efforts and means." Office equipment, he said, included duplicating machines, an electric pen, and a typewriter. Office material included forty-five different circulars, thirty bulletins, and hundreds of preprinted postcards used to respond to common inquiries. Dewey did not mention that this equipment was also being used for ALA and SRA, and for both their journals.[viii]

Although Dewey continued his duties as LJ Managing Editor, things were not going well; LJ lost $1,100 its first year of operation. By late 1878 Bowker decided to cut expenses by moving LJ's business management to New York. Dewey reacted sharply. On January 8, 1879, he threatened to start an "opposition journal" with the help of "leading men of ALA" from Boston unless Journal publishers gave him a more favorable contract. Bowker bristled. LJ could not continue to duplicate expenses at Dewey's Boston office for services which could just as easily be covered at Bowker's New York office, he said, and if Dewey persisted, he would show Cutter and Winsor Dewey's January 8 letter. Bowker realized Dewey was using his ties with ALA to

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[vii] Dewey's undated draft of a prospectus for a library journal is in Box 29, Dewey Mss.

[viii] Proceedings, American Metric Bureau, Vol. I (1877), p. 71. See also Dewey circular to AMB membership, November 15, 1877; and circular entitled "Our First Thousand Days," March 27, 1879, Box 66, Dewey Mss.

press LJ into keeping its business management in Boston. What he did not realize, however, was how closely Dewey had tied all of his reform interests to his Boston office, how tenuously the whole structure balanced on money Dewey had interlinked into a single account, and how threatened that structure became when any one component was removed.[ix]

The incident demonstrates a set of circumstances that for years had a significant impact on ALA. Since October, 1876, Dewey had served as the link between ALA and LJ. On the one hand, he used LJ columns as a way to keep his ideas of an expanded library cooperation and efficiency that would benefit from a library bureau before the eyes of the nation's library community. He also used its advertising sections to market AMB and SRA products, but instead of paying for that space he "traded" it with advertising space in the Metric and SRA Bulletins. No money exchanged hands; the value of the trades occurred entirely in the columns of Dewey's account books. That spelling reformers and metric reform advocates might not be the most promising market for LJ subscriptions did not seem to bother Dewey; in his mind all these activities were part of a large game plan he ran from his "bureaus" in Boston. And since he was not after material gain, he could not fathom how some people might consider his motives suspect. Still, Dewey had no reservations about harnessing his ALA ties to evoke a better deal with LJ, and using that money to support the empire he was trying to piece together in Boston.[x]

In March, 1879, Dewey decided to reorganize his interests and coordinate all of his bureaus into a new organization--the Readers and Writers Economy Company. Dewey served as manager of the company and owned $10,000 of the $25,000 worth of stock. An agreement he drafted with fellow investor Frederick Jackson called upon both parties to "loan" all dividends and salary back to the company at 8 percent interest, and specified that all receipts from the ALA, AMB, SRA, and LJ "be shared equally with Jackson by direct payment" into the RWEC treasury. Jackson was guaranteed a salary of at least $1,500 per year as treasurer, and Dewey agreed to take no more "than $3,500 per year including all commissions on subscriptions and advertising for the Library Journal."[xi] So far as is known, neither Dewey nor Jackson ever informed other affected parties about these arrangements.

Business grew rapidly. By May Dewey had moved to larger quarters at 32 Hawley Street and by June had removed partitions between rooms 6, 7, and 8 to create one big Economy Company

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[ix] Bowker to Dewey, January 9, 1879, R.R. Bowker Papers, Special Collections, New York Public Library, New York, New York (hereafter cited as Bowker Mss.). See also Bowker to Cutter, January 13, 1879; and Bowker to Winsor, January 15, 1879, Bowker Mss.

[x] See, for example, Bowker to Winsor, June 16, 1879, Justin Winsor Letters bound into 1881 volume of Library Journal, Dominican University Library, River Forest, Illinois; and Leypoldt to Bowker, July 1, 1879, Bowker Mss.

[xi] "Readers and Writers Economy Co.," R.G. Dun and Co. Collection, Special Collections Department, Baker Library, Graduate School of Business Administration, Soldiers Field, Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts (hereafter cited as Dun Collection), MA 80/p. 358. Dewey's contract with Jackson, dated May 8, 1879; and "Agreement Made at Boston," May 8, 1879, in Box 81, Dewey Mss..

office to accommodate all his reform interests. December 10, 1879, was a significant day. On his 28th birthday he officially changed the spelling of his name to "Dui" and incorporated SRA in Connecticut and ALA in Massachusetts. He also incorporated the RWEC as a joint stock company, assumed the position of president, and capitalized it at $100,000 by dividing 4,000 shares at $25 each. Dui claimed RWEC as sole manufacturers of four hundred "improved devices for desk, study, and library" designed "to save time, money and labor."[xii]

His relationship with LJ, however, continued to deteriorate. In June, 1880, Bowker got Leypoldt to agree to suspend publication of LJ and consolidate it with PW. When Leypoldt made the announcement, however, the library community deluged him with protests and forced him to recant. Bowker was angry and suspected Dui had been instrumental in the campaign. Not so, Leypoldt wrote. "Dui had no hand in this." Leypoldt's wife was less charitable. "I never believed in the Library Journal, because I knew it would not pay and I thought Dewey about as miserable a specimen of a gabbling idiot as I had ever beheld."[xiii]

On October 11, 1880, however, Dui's problems increased. That day several RWEC stockholders who had been scrutinizing Company books visited a local judge to ask for an injunction against Dui. In their complaint they noted Dui credited himself for 2,684 shares of RWEC stock but did not have the capital to back it up. They told the judge they were forced to ask for an injunction because Dui's majority control would allow him to block any move against his control of the corporation, and they needed an independent audit to figure out RWEC books. Until that audit was complete, they argued, Dui ought to be denied access to RWEC accounts and prevented from incurring any debts. The judge agreed, and granted the injunction. That afternoon, at a regularly scheduled RWEC directors meeting, stockholders surprised Dui by serving him with the injunction. Dui was caught off guard, and insulted at finding his motives were considered suspect. He felt no choice to but resign as president and director of RWEC, both of which were unanimously accepted. At the same time RWEC trustees directed their lawyer to open any mail addressed to Dui that came "through our box." They knew orders and correspondence concerning Economy Company products were just as likely to be addressed to Dui personally or to Dui as secretary of the ALA, AMB, or SRA.[xiv]

Reaction from members of the associations and organizations whose treasuries were now frozen because Dewey had consolidated them all into RWEC accounts was understandably negative. For example, Frederick Leypoldt responded to the news by writing Dewey that "your peculiar way of doing business has cost this office more in time than all that you claim could amount to." At the end of the contract year, he said, Dui would be dropped as LJ editor. ALA moved just as quickly. When Dui did not appear at an ALA Executive Board meeting December 5, the Board

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[xii] For listing of RWEC products, see RWEC letterhead stationery, Box 63, Dewey Mss.

[xiii] Library Journal 5 (July-August, 1880); 207-8; (September-November, 1880): 248-49; Leypoldt to Bowker, August 11, 1880; and August Leypoldt to Bowker, September 18, 1880, Bowker Mss.

[xiv] The "complaint" of the committee, the injunction of the judge, and the minutes of the October 11, 1880, RWEC meeting are in Box 61, Dewey Mss.

accepted a resignation he had not tendered and empowered another officer to take control of ALA funds and books Dui protested, but to no avail. "We argue to no purpose," ALA President Winsor replied.[xv]

The arbitration process was contentious, but Dui finally settled with the RWEC on January 10, 1881. For his part Dui agreed to clear all claims against RWEC from the business associates and professional organizations he represented. For its part the RWEC agreed to return all personal property to Dui and "the three societies in Dui's charge," to transfer "all its rights & title to any good will, patronage, or influence" of the SRA, AMB, and ALA "or the supply departments pertaining to each," and to sell Dui at cost any articles owned by RWEC connected with these organizations and departments. The settlement showed no clear winners or losers. The RWEC's major goal was to rid the company of Dui and "his clogging business complications." Dui realized assets totaling $19,000, but he received nothing for the business nor any compensation for the work he had put into it.[xvi]

Dui lost no time in founding a new business. He used most of the cash realized from the settlement to pay debts to the ALA, SRA, and AMB treasury and to creditors with claims against him as RWEC president, and with money realized from paid-up stock that he pledged as security, he was back in business at 32 Hawley Street. It was from that address he sent out a four-page circular on March 20 announcing his new arrangement. On page four he informed readers of the significant personal sacrifice he was making on behalf of each of these societies, and he called upon members of each to increase orders to his supply departments. "All Metric articles will be sold as before under the name METRIC BUREAU." The "Library Supplies Department," on the other hand, "will go under the name LIBRARY BUREAU." He told readers he had secured four regular and three special assistants, and invited everyone to visit him at his "old offices."[xvii] For the next two years Dui devoted himself to the Library Bureau. R.G. Dun & Company, which compiled credit reports on American businesses between the 1840s and 1880s, described Dui in 1881 as "a sanguine well-meaning man, full of little schemes for economizing the time and labor of librarians & literary men" who had "no capacity for bus. affairs and no means worth mentioning."

Despite a lack of capital, however, Dui persisted. On May 31, 1881, he incorporated the "Library and Metric Bureau" in the State of Massachusetts and continued to promote his educational reform schemes. In 1882, for example, Wellesley hired him as a Library Bureau consultant to reclassify its collections. Dui used the opportunity to expand his original decimal scheme, and he trained several Wellesley Class of 1883 members to implement the changes. By the time he had completed his consultation, he had already determined the substantive changes

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[xv] Leypoldt to Dui, October 4, 1880; October 7, 1880, Box 1; Dui to Winsor, December 13, 1880; Winsor to Dui, December 14, 1880; December 20, 1880; December 23, 1880; December 31, 1880; January 14, 1881; and January 25, 1881, Box 7, Dewey Mss.

[xvi] Copy of the agreement in Box 61, Dewey Mss. Dui details the financial ramifications of his settlement in Dui to Bowker, June 6, 1881, Bowker Mss.

[xvii] Dui's March 20, 1881 circular in Box P-36, Dewey Mss.

and new headings for a second edition.[xviii]

For Melvil Dui, the years in Boston between 1876 and 1883 had been highly productive and highly tumultuous; they were also gratifying and painful. He started and lost one business, and started another like it within weeks. He used his reform zeal to develop credibility with a number of associations he helped organize, then lost that credibility, then began to rebuild it all over again. Throughout he retained his boundless energy, intense commitment, self-righteous arrogance, and irrepressible reform spirit. He made many friends, and many enemies. Most who came in contact with him, however--whether superior, peer, or subordinate--quickly recognized him as a forceful personality not easily swayed from goals he had when he stepped off that train in Boston on April 10, 1876.

But in 1883 Dui was also "open to some engagement where I think I can do good work." On May 7 he found it. On that day he decided to return to his home state of New York by accepting an offer to become Chief Librarian of Columbia College. He saw it as a good opportunity to develop, implement, and ultimately demonstrate the value of most of the library reforms (and some of the metric and spelling reforms) he had been pushing for nearly ten years. And sometime that month, at the request of one of his new employers who was critical of "eccentricity" in "the spelling of his name," he officially changed it back to "Dewey."[xix]

[xviii] See "Library Bureau," MA 88/p. 184, Dun Collection. See John Comaromi, The Eighteen Editions of the Dewey Decimal Classification (Albany, NY: Forest Press, 1976), Chap. 3, for more information on the development of the second edition of the decimal scheme.

[xix] F. Augustus Schermerhorn (Columbia College Trustee) to F.A.P. Barnard (Columbia College President), April 14, 1883; Barnard to Dui, April 15, 1883, Box 18, Dewey Mss.